

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# Denver's AVMA Conventions: 2003 and 2014

**Author's Note:** A revised version of this story posted on August 21, 2014 can be found at Denver's AVMA Conventions: 2003 and 2014.

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith  
August 12, 2014

As I was flying home from the Denver AVMA convention last week, my mind returned to the 2003 meeting, also held in the Mile-High City. About the only thing that seemed the same was the long ride between the airport on Peña Boulevard and the downtown convention hall. Everything else was different.

The world had changed. In 2003, a confident former governor was midway through his first term as US president and the country was facing serious economic concerns and biosecurity threats spawned by 9-11. The AVMA inaugurated Jack Walther as president, rounding out a series of four leaders that began in 2000 with Jim Nave and proceeded through Jim Brandt and Joe Howell the following two years. Two of them (Brandt and Howell) provided consistency as they broke from tradition by serving as chair of the Executive Board during their respective Immediate Past President terms from 2002-04.

These senior AVMA officers set a bold agenda to reinvigorate the economic viability of the profession. As recalled by Dr. Howell (president 2012-13 and Chair of the Executive Board the following year), "We spent a huge amount of time addressing the economic perils facing the profession at the time. We felt we needed to improve the profession's economic situation or perish".<sup>1</sup> Drs. Brandt and Howell were also faced with an "entirely new concept" as a result of 9-11 and realized they would have to lead the mobilization of the profession to ensure preparedness as front line responders in the event of a possible bioterrorism attack.

What changes a mere decade has wrought! The world is now frighteningly more unstable with national and regional conflicts raging in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, and the threat of terrorism rising again from several continents. Irreconcilable divisions within and between branches of the federal and state governments reflect national divides over critical social, structural and economic issues. While the potential impact doesn't call for an equivalent level of anxiety, conflict was also evident at the convention in Denver.

Preceding the start of the convention, the House of Delegates (HOD) considered a series of recommendations by the Executive Board. These proposed amendments to the bylaws were the result of extensive input and feedback from members and volunteer leaders gathered by

the Government Engagement Team. However, their proposals to change delegate elections, voting procedures and length of service landed with a thud. Instead of approving a more flexible leadership model designed to invigorate an organizational structure that many feel constrains opportunities for substantive grass-roots engagement, the recommendations were not approved.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere at the convention, a three-hour meeting considering veterinary supply and demand was led by several people, including Paul Pion, co-founder of Veterinary Information Network. Dr. Pion and others have been vocal critics of the opening of new veterinary colleges and the expansion of class sizes at existing colleges. During the meeting, he expressed concern about the quality of veterinary graduates of the new schools, as well as what is widely perceived to be an oversupply or excess capacity in the professional workforce.<sup>3</sup> The restlessness associated with a growing supply and only modestly-increasing demand is one of the factors that exacerbates the climate of “worry” that was articulated by incoming president Ted Cohn during the Candidates’ Introductory Breakfast on July 25<sup>th</sup>.<sup>4</sup>



*Dr. Valerie Ragan, Director, Center for Public and Corporate Veterinary Medicine  
Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine  
(Photo provided by Dr. Ragan, 2014)*

While Dr. Pion sees only limited opportunities for expanding the profession through diversifying our professional roles, Valerie Ragan, Director of the Center for Public and Corporate Veterinary Medicine at Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, personifies the growing number of inspirational leaders of a new generation of creative thinkers and planners who pursue bold initiatives to diversify and expand the profession in areas outside clinical practice.<sup>5</sup> They see a profession that is anchored too narrowly in traditional small animal practice and that needs to broaden its vision to meet societal needs, both in the US and abroad. For people like Dr. Ragan, the issue is not too many veterinary graduates, but too narrow a vision for an increasingly-diverse profession with unique strengths in comparative medicine.

As I participated in presentations and strategic planning efforts, read reports of meetings, and observed people coming and going, I sensed the antinomy of constriction and expansion at play. I saw the worried look on the faces of people, often huddled in small groups, and I could feel their concern for the future. Elsewhere, I saw clusters of people full of excitement and hope for a new paradigm for veterinary medicine that could provide greater diversity of ideas, programs, and people. It was like a tale of two professions, one looking backwards and one looking forwards, loosely connected by a tangled knot of fraying cord.

Dr. Jim Nave and his colleagues faced the challenges of the last decade with fresh initiatives presented with energy and confidence. They promoted new ideas for veterinary medicine, rather than hunkering down and accepting the status quo. They inaugurated the National Commission on Veterinary Economic Issues, and in what proved to become a prescient move, an initiative to monitor and facilitate the improvement of veterinary education on an international level.<sup>6</sup> This indirectly laid the groundwork for Roger Mahr, president in 2006, to launch the One Health initiative.<sup>7</sup>

While the world of 2014 may be more complex than a decade ago, I applaud those who see the current challenges as opportunities for growth and diversification and who are providing leadership in the broader realm of agriculture and the health professions. One only has to learn of the vision of people like Kathleen Goepfinger, President and CEO of Midwestern University in Glendale, Arizona, to realize that at least one leading edge of our profession may be returning to our roots in urban comparative medicine, left behind a century ago.<sup>8</sup>

When we consider our return to Denver in another decade, let's anticipate a celebration that captures the excitement of a profession that has grown in numbers, influence, and impact because we chose to capture the energy of the possibilities to come rather than the circumstances of the world in which we were educated.

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<sup>1</sup> Howell, Joe (AVMA President 2002-03, Chair of AVMA Executive Board 2003-04). Email to Donald F. Smith (Cornell University). August 7, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Nolen, R. Scott. [Governance reform team resigns after HOD vote](#). 151<sup>st</sup> AVMA Annual Convention Daily News, July 28, 2014, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Burns, Katie. [Sessions explore issues in supply of veterinarians](#). 151<sup>st</sup> AVMA Annual Convention Daily News, July 29, 2014, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Nolen, R. Scott. [For Cohn, relevance of AVMA and profession is front-and-center](#). 151<sup>st</sup> AVMA Annual Convention Daily News, July 27, 2014, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ragan, Valerie E. (Director of Center for Public and Corporate Veterinary Medicine). Comments to participants in the Strategic planning session for Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative, AVMA Convention, Denver, Colorado, July 26, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Kahler, Susan C. [Honoring an AVMA original](#). JAVMA News, September 1, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Nolen, R. Scott. [Mahr calls for 'one health' initiative](#). JAVMA News. September 1, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Donald F. Arizona's New College of Veterinary Medicine. *Veterinary Legacy*, January 18, 2013. <http://veterinarylegacy.blogspot.com/2013/01/arizonas-new-college-of-veterinary.html>

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**KEYWORDS:**

American Veterinary Medical Association  
History of Veterinary Medicine  
Valerie Ragan  
Jim Nave  
Jim Brandt  
Joe Howell  
Paul Pion  
Veterinary Information Network  
Ted Cohn  
Roger Mahr  
House of Delegates  
Veterinary Workforce  
Women's Veterinary Development Leadership Initiative  
Denver  
AVMA Convention 2014  
Diversity  
Kathleen Goeppinger  
Midwestern University

**TOPIC:**

Leadership in Veterinary Medicine

**LEADING QUESTION:**

Do we have too many veterinarians or too narrow a vision?

**META-SUMMARY:**

The AVMA Convention dealt with some thorny issues about the future of veterinary medicine.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

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*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.